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## THE INHIBITORY INSTINCTS<sup>1</sup>

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Joseph Conrad in "A Familiar Preface" to his volume *A Personal Record* reveals with amazing frankness his literary creed. This is of interest to those who admire his consummate skill as a craftsman and those who are concerned with problems of literary criticism. It ought, moreover, to have especial significance to teachers of English, particularly those who are engaged in teaching students to write, because of a startling confession.

He says:

In one, at least, authoritative quarter of criticism I am suspected of a certain unemotional, grim acceptance of facts. . . . My answer is that . . . there are some of us to whom an open display of sentiment is repugnant. I would not unduly praise the virtue of restraint. It is often merely temperamental. But it is not always a sign of coldness. It may be pride. There can be nothing more humiliating than to see the shaft of one's emotions miss the mark of either laughter or tears. Nothing more humiliating! And this for the reason that should the mark be missed, should the open display of emotion fail to move, then it must perish unavoidably in disgust and contempt. No artist can be reproached for shrinking from a risk which only fools run to meet and only genius dare confront with impunity. In a task which mainly consists in laying one's soul more or less bare to the world, a regard for decency, even at the cost of success, is but the regard for one's own dignity which is inseparably united with the dignity of one's work.

<sup>1</sup> President's Address, National Council of Teachers of English, Boston, November 24, 1919.

Although Mr. Conrad justifies his own restraint on other more philosophic grounds, it seems to me of especial significance to us that a writer of his undoubted gifts and generally recognized success should plead the fear of failure, the possibility of ridicule, as a justification for his own reticence.

"A regard for decency, even at the cost of success." How accurately the phrase epitomizes the cause of most of our failures or—even worse—of our half-successes as teachers of English! . . . The students' instinctive avoidance of possible ridicule, their preference of a mediocre success to potential failure, the expression of the conventional instead of their own honest opinions, saying what the teacher expects them to say instead of what they actually believe—are not these the greatest obstacles against which the teacher has to struggle? The mediocrity of the results of our efforts cannot be due wholly to ignorance, nor indifference, nor universal lack of talent on the part of students. It is rather caused by our inability to break down their barriers of reserve, to overcome the inhibition of self-consciousness, to make them realize that the satisfaction and value of one real success more than compensates for the disappointment and humiliation of nine or ninety and nine failures.

How we are to do this constitutes the unique problem for the teacher of English. It springs from the nature of the subject itself, from the fundamental difference between English and all other subjects, in their more elementary stages at least. The teacher of mathematics, to use the classic antithesis, scarcely expects creative effort on the part of his pupils. They are not asked to evolve algebraic or geometric laws out of their own consciousness. The student who essays an original method of demonstrating a theorem will inevitably discover that conformance to conventional methods is more productive of results. Neither is the student asked to create a Latin grammar, nor to discover new facts or even new relations between known facts in history. It must be admitted that much of the subject-matter included under English is as definitely objective as Latin or physics or history. But in its more important aspects the effort demanded of the student is not the acquiring of knowledge, however important that may be, but is essentially

creative. Every composition which is worthy of the name, and which is not a mere written recitation, is or ought to be in a peculiar sense the student's own. Writing, however impeccable it may be in matters of technique, in school as elsewhere, can never be anything but worthless unless the writer has an idea to express. The study of literature has for its primary object, not the acquisition of knowledge, but rather the broadening and deepening of the emotions and sympathies, the increasing of the power to appreciate beauty, the development of the critical faculty. No amount of biographical data about an author, nor information about a work itself, nor memorizing of what others, including the teacher, have said about it will avail unless there is an individual reaction on the part of the student. Unless he has learned what constitutes excellence, is in some small measure able to discern wherein merit lies, has formed for himself some standards, however implicit, of criticism, the effort is fruitless. In the study of English the student—if I may borrow a metaphor from DeQuincey—"must weave his web out of his own bowels." Whether it be on the side of composition or on the side of criticism, his work is distinctly creative.

If so talented a writer as Conrad, one so conscious of his own powers, pleads the fear of ridicule in justification of self-restraint, how inevitable that we should be confronted with this inhibitory force in young students faced by a unique task and conscious, as many of them are, of their own modest ability. How are we to counteract this most paralyzing of all restraints, the self-consciousness of students? Within reasonable limits the fear of failure is the most potent stimulus to conscientious effort in any public or semipublic performance. We ought not to eliminate—it would perhaps be impossible to do that—but rather to minimize it to the point where it will be an effective stimulus.

To do so, we shall have to alter both the nature of our requirements and our standards of values. The evil of much of our teaching is that it tends to develop conventionality, insincerity, and even dishonesty on the part of students. Greater stress must be laid on sincerity and honesty of opinion, both in composition and in the classroom discussion of literature, even at the expense of objective

accuracy. The sincere expression of an immature opinion should be regarded more highly than the mere repetition or reflection of the opinion of others. No one would definitely uphold the theory that the work of children is to be judged by the standard of accomplishment of our greatest artists and our most profound critics. And yet as a matter of practice I fear that this is too often done.

There is not time—nor is this the place—for me to enter into any elaborate discussion of the fundamental theory of teaching English composition. But of one thing I am profoundly certain. The student who, in order to escape failure, or low grades, or the possible sarcasm of his teacher, or the ridicule of his fellows, writes what he thinks others would have him say is not receiving the sort of training that he should get. There is little possibility of developing his power as a thinker, and there is grave danger of his losing that intellectual integrity which in many ways is the most important asset that our education can furnish. Honesty of opinion and the courage to express that opinion will prove one of the greatest safeguards against the danger of our future voters being swept away by the waves of hysterical radicalism now sweeping over the country. There must be freedom of speech in the schools to prevent license in speech and action in the future.

This means that the teacher is not to judge a student's work by the standards applied to that of mature men and women. It means also that he must no longer criticize it from the point of view of subjective impression. The pupil must be trained out of the habit of writing for the teacher if he is to escape conventionality or sophistry, or both. For either of these standards of judgment there must be substituted objective standards adapted to the student's own powers.

I doubt whether composition scales, such as the Hillegas or the Harvard-Newton scale, can ever be successfully applied in the everyday task of criticizing and grading students' themes. They are, however, of inestimable value to the teacher. They enable him to substitute objective standards, somewhat indefinite to be sure, for his own subjective impressions, and to correct them by constant comparison with the judgment of others. The chief benefit of the attempt to work out scales for various types of work

lies not in the results but in the educative value of the process itself to those engaged in it. Nothing can be more enlightening, nor more illustrative of the widely varying and often impossible standards applied in the teaching of English, than for the teachers of any school, or any city, to attempt to reach some common standard of evaluation. Recently our own staff of twenty people engaged in the teaching of Freshman composition attempted a collective judgment on five selected themes. Those instructors had been working together for a number of years with constant association and frequent staff meetings. On the five themes their grades varied, on a scale of ten, as follows: 0-7, 0-6, 0-4, 6-10, 2-8. The most surprising feature was that the older and more experienced teachers showed the widest variation. We gave up the attempt in order to avoid a riot. But I am sure that in spite of the acrimony involved there was much questioning by individuals of the infallibility of their own judgments. By all means let us have scales, not one or two worked out by specialists in education, but numerous attempts, which if they do generate a great deal of heat cannot fail to produce some light.

When students realize that they are not asked to compete with the great writers of prose or even with their teachers (and I intend no invidious distinction), but with each other, they will certainly approach the task of writing with greater zest and without the dread of certain failure. At least they will be able to preserve their own integrity and to have a decent respect for their own ideas. After all, the fundamental incentive for anyone to write is the belief that he has ideas which are worth expressing.

The unpopularity of the classics is due not so much to the fact that they have not the qualities that appeal to students as to the fact that teachers have expected from children the reactions and opinions that are natural to mature, educated readers. The result is, inevitably, insincerity and conventionality. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves." Pick up almost any one of the classics edited for school use, generally by someone more anxious to instruct the teacher than to educate the pupil. I choose *Sohrab and Rustum*, which members of my summer course for teachers assure me is the most difficult narrative poem to teach to

high-school students. There is of course the usual introductory material. It begins with a biographical sketch:

Matthew Arnold was born at Laleham, England, Dec. 24, 1822. He was the son of Dr. Thomas Arnold, who, as head master of the Rugby School, was accounted one of the greatest educational reformers of England.

Matthew Arnold entered Rugby in 1837, and a few years later went to Balliol College, Oxford, where in 1840 he won a scholarship for proficiency in Latin. In 1843 he won the Mewdigate prize for English verse, the subject of his poem being "Cromwell."

While Arnold was a student at Oxford, he associated with such men as Thomas Hughes, the Froudes, Bishop Fraser, Dean Church, John Henry Newman, and Arthur Hugh Clough. With Clough he formed a deep friendship, and mourned his death in the exquisite elegiac poem "Thyrsis." In 1844 he was graduated with honors, and in 1845 was elected a fellow of Oriel College. Two years later he became private secretary to Lord Lansdowne, which position he held until 1851.

The poem is evidently to be made the medium of forcing a student to learn the facts of Arnold's life. Well and good, if that knowledge will enable him the better to understand and appreciate the poem. But what is there here that any high-school pupil could understand and apply to *Sohrab and Rustum*? There follows the usual citations from important critics. The first one begins thus:

Matthew Arnold was deeply imbued with the spirit of Greek culture, and in this culture he found his ideal standards, to which he brought for comparison all questions that engrossed his thoughts. He is perhaps the purest classic writer that England ever produced; classic not merely in the repose of his style, but in the unity and simplicity of his habit of thought.

The whole apparatus of high-school texts seems to be an ingenious device for making any possible pleasure that the student might get out of reading the work itself an excuse for loading him up with a mass of miscellaneous information which, in some mysterious way, is supposed to do him good. Is it any wonder he gets the impression that what is important is knowledge about the work rather than knowledge of it? When he is asked to express his opinion of a book, he rushes to the library to see what others have said, and if an essay or report is required, the result is a clever patchwork or rehash of the criticisms he finds. The chief virtue of such a performance lies in the skill with which the writer avoids technical, if not actual, plagiarism. He has not been taught to form his own

opinions. If he has any opinion of his own, experience has taught him to distrust it or at least to conceal it. What is necessary is to teach him to read as normal, healthy human beings read, bringing to bear the knowledge and experience he has. If this is not adequate to the task in hand, let him seek it in biography or geography or mythology or criticism and apply as much of it as lies within his power. It is useless to force upon him the subtle discriminations of the critics. But we may take a lesson in the teaching of literature as in many other fields from Josiah Royce, who said, "No fine distinction was ever uninteresting to any man at the moment he made it for himself."

This does not involve the surrender of the teacher's function to insist upon accuracy and truth, nor the sacrifice of the inherited wisdom of the ages because it may not seem wise to the adolescent. But whether we will or not, students form an opinion of their own in regard to what they study and read. If we are ever to educate their tastes, to correct their errors, it can only be by encouraging the frankest expression on their part, by stimulating them to feel that the chief virtue in a book for them is their own reaction to it and not the opinions of others in regard to it. We ought to insist upon sincerity here as elsewhere, not only because it is a virtue in itself, but because without it we have nothing on which to build.

The second inhibition is one which does not arise from any peculiarity in our subject but which confronts all teachers alike. It requires no acute observer of our schools and colleges to detect that enthusiasm in regard to any subject of study is regarded by students as a *faux pas*. One may grow enthusiastic over athletics, or dancing, or dramatics, or politics, without losing social prestige. But whoever delights in learning must cleverly conceal the fact from his fellow-students. Most of all he must never reveal it to his instructors or he becomes "a dig," "a greasy grind"—a pariah. Undoubtedly, teachers have always been handicapped by this attitude of their students; a native or assumed passivity is to the student a protective coloration against his natural enemy, the teacher. The traditional attitude of the student is to regard education not as a privilege but as a duty. Like most duties it is disagreeable. It is to be evaded if possible, but if not, then to be



performed with the minimum of self-sacrifice. This instinct of self-preservation, this application in the schools of the labor-union theory of suppressing competition, of limiting output, of shortening the day's labor, is undoubtedly begotten of compulsory education. Man must work to live, but he desires to live as easily as possible. Either the state or the parents demand that the child be educated, and there is the natural reaction against whatever is compulsory. Education also, like salvation, is free and must share the contempt of whatever may be gained without sacrifice.

The present chaotic condition of secondary education throughout the country is, in large measure, due to an attempt to awaken a greater responsiveness and more appreciation and enthusiasm on the part of students toward high-school training. Educators have assumed that the fault lay not with the students, but in what was offered to them. If they have no appetite for learning, let us change the diet, and instead of giving them Latin and mathematics offer them agriculture and domestic science. Educational dietitians assure us there are as many intellectual calories in bookkeeping as in algebra, as much mental protein in garment-making as in chemistry.

The great diversity in English in our public schools, the feverish experimentation with all sorts of new material, is only evidence that the English teachers are following these leaders. They have had the same baffling experience; they have become dissatisfied with the results attained. Many of them have given up trying to interest the student in what they think he ought to be interested in, and are experimenting in a vain effort to find out what he will like. They have not forsworn English, but they have definitely abandoned literature. Instead of the *Spectator*, they read the *Literary Digest*; the local newspaper has replaced Lincoln and Franklin. Milton and Tennyson have been given up for something "peppy" in the way of new poetry. And I even hear of schools in which the *Saturday Evening Post* is studied in classes in English. They have sold their birthright for a mess of Potash and Perlmutter.

On the side of composition there is also evident this trend toward popularizing the content of the English course. Greater emphasis is laid on the more practical and utilitarian forms of writing.

Special stress is given to the writing of letters both business and social. Journalism, so called, has been introduced into many secondary schools. Teachers are likely to forget that a student's inability to write a presentable letter is due not to the fact that he has never had training in this specific form of composition, but to the fact that he has never learned to write. Whatever is peculiar to the newspaper "story" may be taught to any reasonably intelligent person in a few weeks. Throwing a composition into the arbitrary and conventionalized form of the daily press report does not relieve the writer of the necessity of complying with the more rigorous demands of structure in its larger sense. What seems to me the overemphasis on the narrative types in our secondary schools, even to the introduction of attempts at writing the short-story, that most exacting and most artistic form that prose has ever reached, springs from the same general principle of building upon the pre-existing interests of pupils. We also hear a great deal nowadays of oral composition as a panacea for all the ills to which the English teacher is heir. I would not deny the value of training in oral composition as a most useful ally and supplement of written composition. I have on other occasions both spoken and written in favor of it. But I am firmly convinced that it can never give the discipline in organization, in structure, in logical, coherent thinking, and in the finer discrimination of ideas and of words, together with an appreciation of their subtler relations, which it is one of the chief functions of training in writing to furnish.

All this, which is euphemistically termed "broadening the content of the English course," is but the setting up of a brazen serpent. It is not in the creation of new gods that our salvation lies. The price which we are compelled to pay for this ephemeral enthusiasm is, even in this era of inflated prices for inferior goods, altogether too high. It means the sacrifice, for the bare necessity of keeping alive, of many of those less tangible realities which make living worth while.

If this diagnosis of our educational ills has been correct, if the remedies which have been administered are to be regarded as mere palliatives, what then is the prognosis, what the proper form of therapy? Perhaps here, almost within the shadow of the Mother

Church, I may venture the suggestion that the wisest course is to attribute the illness to the evil thought of the patient. At any rate, a proper bedside manner is half the battle. The confidence of the physician begets confidence in the patient. It is evident, I believe, that too many teachers of English are lacking in confidence in their subject and confidence in themselves. The cause is not far to seek.

More than any other subject in the curriculum English suffers from a lack of organization. Perhaps the greatest service yet rendered by the National Council is the work of its committee on the course of study, by which an attempt has been made to substitute some definite progression for the more or less haphazard arrangement that has been so prevalent. To teacher and student alike one year's English work is differentiated from the other only by the fact that it is "more English." It is inevitable that there should be a certain sameness about the content of the English course, but that does not preclude the idea of definite progression from year to year. The student is oppressed not only by the sameness of method but by the fact that he himself cannot perceive advancement as he can in those other subjects in which there is a logical continuity. Our course of study is too often like those compositions which may be read backward with equal facility—and futility; or if one chooses he may begin in the middle and go either way. Even where the historical method may be applied, the chronological order followed, as in the history of English literature, there are not wanting those who hold that the proper method is to begin with Shaw and Galsworthy and creep up on Chaucer from the rear. In the work of any given year, whether it be first year in high school or Freshman year at college, there are too few teachers who have any definite plan of procedure, who know how the work of any one day or week or even month is to lead to and prepare for that which follows. They lead the hand-to-mouth existence which is inevitable for those who have no accumulated reserve.

It is vain to expect, it would be foolish to demand, that we should ever have such a standardization of courses as is to be found in mathematics or the sciences. But it is not unreasonable to require that each individual teacher should know what he expects

his students to learn during any given period, and that he should so arrange his program that there will be a definite gradation. When students realize that the teacher is not merely "on his way" but that he has some definite objective, a large part of the apathy of which we now complain will disappear.

This is impossible, however, under present conditions. The complaint, which is so common among us, and which leads to so much unnecessary animosity between teachers in the high schools and those in elementary schools on the one hand and the teachers in colleges on the other, that students are not adequately prepared has a valid basis. The teacher is not so much responsible as the system, or rather lack of it. What may students be supposed—reasonably supposed—to have learned when they enter high school or preparatory school or when they enter college? Who is there who will be rash enough to answer this question? We can have no confidence in planning our work, because the foundations on which we must build are too often but shifting sand. Even as I write there comes a letter from one of my last year's students who has gone out to teach in one of the best of our smaller high schools. She says: "In Junior English, I am required to teach an impossible course—the history of English literature—to students who do not know a noun from an adverb, and whose minds are blithely innocent of any such thing as historical background. How can you teach Chaucer to a boy who seems not to have a single neurone in his head capable of making historical associations?"

Last week we dropped sixty students from our course in Freshman English, and required them to enter a special preparatory class. The teacher in one of the sections of this group spent forty minutes of the first recitation period in explaining the difference between a co-ordinating and a subordinating conjunction, and then asked anyone to point out a subordinating conjunction in a sentence in the text. Only one youth volunteered, and he named the word *is*!

It should be one of the chief functions of such an organization as the National Council to encourage and to co-ordinate the work which is being done throughout the country to establish minimum essentials for the work of any given year. The Illinois Association of Teachers of English, by co-operative action, has made a beginning

in this work. It must be carried farther. Conditions must be altered so that responsibility on the part both of the teacher and the student can be fixed. Without it no one of us can approach his task with intelligence and confidence.

If by organization, by intelligent planning, by establishing individual responsibility and mutual co-operation, we do all that we properly may do to free our work of the handicap imposed by the indifference of students toward our subject or even their just contempt for it, there still remains an element of success that can be supplied only by the individual teacher. At the risk of being platitudinous I suggest that there must be greater enthusiasm on the part of the teacher himself. By this I do not mean that false theatric attitude, that exploitation of personality, unfortunately too common, nor the introduction into the classroom of the methods of the Chautauqua. Rather I mean the enthusiasm begotten of a belief in the essential dignity and worth of the subject itself and of knowledge of a purpose and a system in its presentation.

There is too little joyousness in the teaching profession, too little evidence of the spirit of the modern beatitude, "Blessed is he that hath found his work and rejoiceth in it."